REFLECTIONS ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The Divinity School
The University of Chicago
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There comes a moment when clergy talk and the question of education comes up. "What seminary?" we ask one another. When I'm asked, I answer, "University of Chicago," and inevitably the response is something like, "Oh, -- McCormick," and patiently I explain, "not McCormick, the Divinity School of the University of Chicago." The hopelessly out-of-it then say, "I didn't know there was a seminary there," and I say, "Well, it's really not a seminary ..."

Those who are with-it are impressed ...

* that I attended the Divinity School
* that I graduated and am not still working to complete my degree
* that I'm still in the ministry.

For 33 years, I have enjoyed associating my name with this place and the instant bump in my stock value when I am able to say, "The Divinity School of the University of Chicago."

I am more grateful than I can tell you to have been named Distinguished Alumnus. Although when Clark Gilpin called, he said he had good news and bad news. The good news was that I had been named Distinguished Alumnus. The bad news was that I would have to deliver a lecture. It never occurred to me that someone -- other than my family and friends, might actually show up to listen to it.

I am particularly honored by this award because of what I have done with the theological education provided by The Divinity School, namely, invested it in parish ministry for 33 years. The Divinity School didn't particularly encourage me to do that; didn't discourage me either. As a matter of fact, as I remember it, I'm not sure, with one or two exceptions, that The Divinity School much cared what I did with my theological education -- so long as I got it. And I want to argue that because of that "radical vocational laissez faire," and a series of decisions I made -- mostly out of economic necessity -- I learned a lot about how to be a minister, how to exercise leadership in the church, if you will. I am everlastingly grateful for that blessed accident and with your patience, I'd like to exegete it this evening.

But mostly I am honored because of the deep respect I have for The Divinity School and for what you did for me and what I have seen you continue to do for everyone, but for prospective pastors particularly, namely reflect as rigorously as possible on the phenomenon of religion, the texts, practices and experiences of religion, the mystery of theology -- that presumptuous enterprise that proposes to study and know God, or know what it means to know God, or to not know God, with the same intellectual energy and academic discipline as the psychologists, nuclear physicists, biologists and literary critics bring to their respective pursuits at other places in the university community. That, for this individual Christian, pastor and churchman, has been a precious gift.

One of the things I regularly say to a couple standing before me on the occasion of holy matrimony is that there are only two or three really important decisions to be made in life. Immanuel Kant, I learned at this place, said there were only three important questions: "What can I know," "What should I do," and "What can I hope for?" My most important decision, it turns out, was to marry Sue. But a very close second was the decision to apply for admission to this Divinity School, or the Federated Theological Faculty as it was known -- a unique experiment in theological education that brought together Chicago Theological Seminary, Meadville, Disciples Divinity House and The Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

I hadn't dealt with numbers one or three of the Kantian trilogy -- I didn't know much of anything. Furthermore, my undergraduate liberal arts education had brought me to a point, after four years of humanities, history, English and political science, of knowing with a distressing clarity that I didn't know much of anything -- which made me a perfect candidate for The Divinity School.

Those of us who attended Chicago, Harvard, Yale, Vanderbilt, Duke, read John Updike's Roger's Version with a particular sensitivity. I've concluded, by the way, that Updike really wants Clark Gilpin's job. In his most recent novel, Updike reveals that he knows a lot about and, being Updike, tells the reader far more than he/she wishes to know about, Princeton Seminary. Or maybe it's my job Updike wants. The protagonist of For the Beauty of the Lilies, after all, is the Reverend Clarence Wilmot, pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church, alas, of Patterson, New Jersey, not Chicago, but it's a minor detail. The real problem is that the Reverend Mr. Wilmot loses his faith and his voice in the first chapter, which limits my use of this analogy from the pulpit.

Roger's Version is about a professor at a divinity school that is clearly Harvard. At the beginning, the reader is introduced to the main character who is ruminating about the school.

> "Believing souls are trucked in like muddy, fragrant, cabbages from the rural hinterland and in three years of fine distinctions and exegetical quibbling we have chopped them into coleslaw saleable at any suburban supermarket. We take in saints and send out ministers, workers in the vineyard of inevitable anxiety and discontent," [1]

Well, maybe Harvard, or Princeton, but not here. Not me or anybody I knew. I was no saint ... certainly not a fragrant cabbage. More like a raw beet, I thought; pretty tasteless, not very attractive and with no observable nutritional value.

In fact, I learned to think at The Divinity School.

I am not a scholar primarily, but The University of Chicago made it forever important to wish I were, made it quite impossible for me to ponder human faith for long without scholarship: made me forever respect those who do think and research and translate and write and create new ways to think about the human experience of God: made me to focus on what's new, what new book is stimulating conversation, what new challenge to the tradition is stirring up controversy and ruffling feathers, made me grateful for the community of scholars, made me uncomfortable with the ideological dismissal of scholarship as detrimental to faith. I wrote a column recently for the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation in which I observed that the function of a church press is not only to produce sales materials but critical scholarship that challenges the faith itself. I said one of

our finest hours was when our Presbyterian Publishing House, Westminster Press, published books on the death of God theology. I received an angry letter from one of my brothers in which he told me I made him ashamed to be a Presbyterian and furthermore, I was stupid. Obviously, he never had to contend with Bernie Loomer in a course in theology.

Chicago taught me to think about what I was reading, seeing, experiencing.

I got here not because of a clear sense of vocation or purpose. I got here, more or less, because I couldn't think of anything better to do. I had always gone to church and in the back of my mind had always thought about becoming a minister, but I never said it out loud much because I never had a very good reason to. I assumed that if you decided to study theology, you ought to have a pretty good reason, one that would fly when you were asked by your aunts what you planned to do with your life. I knew people who knew -- exactly -- that they were supposed to be ministers. I knew people God had addressed directly, by name. I had a friend in high school who bought a Buick because God told him to. Nothing like that every happened to me.

All I had was an itch that I couldn't scratch. A religion course in my freshman year at Franklin and Marshall College pretty much took care of my pre-critical literalism. But when my buddies threw it all out because, as we all suspected, creation took more than six days and Jonah was a nice story -- interesting, but still just a story, I continued to be intrigued with the professors who taught it and who preached in chapel and who were, in addition, ministers: Charles Spotts, Bob Mickey, and above all, G. Wayne Glick. Glick was my advisor. He loved God, a good cigar and the Chicago Cubs in that order, depending on the season of the year. When I went to see him as I was obliged to do in my senior year, I told him that my options seemed to be IBM, law school or the U.S. Marine Corps. I also revealed my secret interest in ministry, but also the embarrassing fact that I had no earthly reason to want to do something like that.

Glick proposed an alternative to boot camp, law school or selling typewriters. "Why don't you go to Chicago," he said. "Take a year. Take your new wife and go study at The Divinity School and Chicago Theological Seminary for a year. The Divinity School won't care if you want to be a minister, won't bother you about making a vocational decision (that really was the issue), will probably offer you a fellowship." "Besides," he said, "if it turns out you don't like theology, Chicago has the Cubs," -- which was where Glick's heart really was and which tells you something about his character, if not his power of discernment.

I heard from him recently and he's still at it. He's an alumnus and had read about the award. He offered his congratulations but wondered if in my capacity as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) there wasn't something I could do about the Cubs. I assured him that we really are only three players away from a world series title. A third baseman who can hit 290 and drive in 90 runs, a left-handed starter and a stopper, and I told him his long suffering had made him a better person and to wait till next year.

Glick was right about Chicago. Sue and I arrived in September of 1959 with our Ford Fairlaine, all our worldly possessions and $700 on the night something happened in Chicago that has not happened since. The White Sox beat Boston and clinched the AL Pennant. The civil defense sirens were set off all over the city and we thought our first night in Chicago would be our last on earth.

We fell in love with the city. We walked to the Museum of Science and Industry and the beach, discovered the Art Institute and saw our first real paintings, did our Christmas shopping in the loop and never in our lives felt as urbane and sophisticated as we did that Christmas when we brought home gifts for our parents in packages from Carson Pirie Scott and Marshall Field's.

And the school ... indulge me for a minute. A distinguished alumnus should have the privilege of a little nostalgia. One of my favorite pages in Roger Angel's classic baseball anthology, Five Seasons, is simply a list of names, as familiar and beautiful as the opening measures of Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusic. Lovely names like ...

The Babe	The Brat
Scooter	Feller, Beardon & Garcia
Rube	Reynolds, Raschi & Lopat
Pee Wee	Mantle
Duke	Mays, Musial and Mize
Hank	
Ralph	
Ernie	

Well, how about this Eine Kleine Theological Nachtmusic -- circa 1959:

Robert Grant and Marcus Barth
Harrelson and Rylarsdamm
Hiltner
Westburg
Meland and Loomer
James Nichols
Gibson Winter
Nathan Scott
Mircea Eliade and Sittler ... Professor Joseph Sittler

The FTF arrangement came to an end after my first year and, even though I had entered through CTS, I and a few others declared ourselves as students of The Divinity School.

Even when I wasn't sure what they were talking about, an experience I recall happening fairly regularly listening to Loomer, I learned:

* to appreciate antiquity, for one thing, from Grant,
* that all of life is somehow Exodus and Exile and Homecoming, from Rylarsdamm,
* to listen, listen carefully and quietly, from Westburg (maybe the most practical wisdom I ever learned),
* to experience transcendence in art and literature, from Scott (one of the most precious of gifts I have ever been given),
* to wonder at mystery and respect its approach in other traditions, from Eliade,
* to love the city and to be forever impatient with its failures and urgent about its possibilities, from Winter,

* and to appreciate and love the power and the simple beauty of words, from Sittler -- words of Walt Whitman and Mr. Eliot and the Psalmist, which has always informed my own theology of a love for The Word, the Logos,
* and from Marcus Barth -- something I have never forgotten and recall every single week of my life -- the Word in the text. If you can't find it, he said, "It is not the text's fault. Go back again. Dig until you find it."

At the same time, The Divinity School left me wonderfully unencumbered by a network of fellow graduates in my church. There are a few of us -- hidden away like precious pearls buried in a field, or leaven in the loaf, or maybe just a little tabasco in the shrimp sauce. We don't have reunions. Although I did have the great pleasure of working on the staff of the Broad Street Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Ohio with another Divinity School graduate, the Reverend Gerald Gregg. Gerry, a pretty good Presbyterian, called to tell me that being elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church was small potatoes compared to being chosen Alumnus of the Year at The Divinity School, in his humble opinion.

And one other thing. For 25 years The Divinity School was the only educational institution with which I had even a remote connection that did not badger me for money. I made the mistake of saying that within earshot of Chris Gamwell and Clark Gilpin one time several years ago and that was that. Now I am asked annually.

I am on the Board of McCormick Theological Seminary. For the past few months I have spoken at four of our Presbyterian seminaries and before the year is out, will visit seven more. The presidents of our seminaries are trusted, creative and respected leaders in my church. I believe in what they are doing. But I believe equally in the importance of what The Divinity School does: the free and often free-wheeling inquiry into the nature of what human beings call God: the disciplined asking of the most important of all questions: the pursuit of the truth, if you will, the assumption that the pursuit, or a community of scholarship called a university, is in its own way an act of faith, a way of believing, of loving God with the mind.

But now -- does that, does what you do equip women and men to be ministers, church leaders? Part of why you are so important is precisely that while preparing people for ministry happens here, it is not your primary reason for being, at least that is what it seems to me. And out of my own experience, I have an analysis and a kind of proposal that I'm pondering.

After I completed my first year at Chicago, two forces converged in my life. The first was that we had a baby -- people actually used to get married at 21 and start having babies, one of the very happy results of which is you can jog with your 35 year-old daughter and actually enjoy your grandchildren. Rightly or wrongly, we thought we needed space -- grass -- an inflatable swimming pool, sand box and swings, a charcoal grill.

At the same time, our $700 ran out. I was working as a janitor at night, 6:00 to 10:00, and all day Saturday, and that summer worked on a construction crew all day, Monday through Friday. "Maybe there's another way to do this," we reasoned. By this time, by the way, I was hooked -- or called, if you prefer ecclesiastical language. It had something to do with Joe Sittler and Nathan Scott putting black robes on and preaching in Bond Chapel. It had something to do with James Nichols' Presbyterianism. And it had everything in the world to do with Lent and Holy Week and Good Friday -- and the awful realization that the Christian claim is that it all somehow comes down to that -- to that man -- dying, willingly agreeing to that, and the connection between all of

that and what a young German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had written and what was beginning to happen in the American south and in the south side of Chicago. In any event, I decided around Easter that I'd give it a try.

So the resolution to my double dilemma -- space and money -- came in the form of a notice I read on the bulletin board.

In the midst of notices of people who wanted a ride to New York City, or needed to sell a stereo, rent an apartment or give away unexpected kittens, there was an item that caught my eye. The Union Church of Dyer, Indiana was looking for a student pastor, 25 miles south of Chicago in the Calumet region of Northern Indiana. Duties: preaching weekly, some calling. Salary: $50 per week; free use of the parsonage -- three bedrooms with a quarter acre lot. It was the closest I have ever come to a clear and direct word from the Lord. Fifty dollars a week -- three bedrooms -- a place for the inflatable pool! When I rushed home with the news that I had had an epiphany experience, Sue, ever the realist, said, "What about that 'preach once a week' part?" She has always been a consistent speaker of truth and she knew a terrible truth about me. I had preached one sermon in my life -- and it was awful. I hadn't the foggiest notion of how to begin. In fact, I hadn't any notion at all of what I was getting us into.

No one thought it was a good idea. Someone at The Divinity School was concerned about the 25 mile drive. Phil Anderson at Chicago Theological Seminary thought I might wait another year. My parents were still hoping I'd come to my senses and go to law school.

The truth was that I was not remotely prepared for what happened next. But I had a house with a bedroom for the baby and an extra room for guests and a backyard and $50 per week, which was exactly $12.50 more than the $37.50 I was paid to be a janitor. "How hard can this be?" I reasoned.

Well, it is tempting and even customary to say that we learned everything we know about our vocation from situations like Dyer, Indiana. I have concluded that that is not quite true. They didn't teach me exactly. They were the extraordinarily patient and graceful context in which I could and did learn. In fact, I am convinced that a creative dynamic was set off by being there, in that little parish, as preacher, pastor, counselor, administrator -- which transformed what was going on in Swift Hall into preparation for ministry. And I'm prepared to ground that proposal in something Don Browning has written and to which I will return, namely that while we assume that abstract thinking precedes and prepares us for practical thinking, the reverse is actually the case. Abstract thinking follows practical thinking.

It was the necessity of standing up on Sunday morning and saying something to that unsuspecting congregation in Dyer, and then having to do it again seven days later, that made me learn how to create and preach sermons. I never had a course on preaching. There was none at The Divinity School. What I did, out of the terror of next Sunday, was start to listen with white knuckle intensity. I listened to preachers in chapel -- Sittler and Nichols and Scott and Barth -- I even stayed up to listen to Billy Graham on TV, and I read everything I could find, some of it good -- most of it not very helpful. And I apprenticed myself to preachers without their ever knowing it: Ernie Campbell and Barnett Blakemore, Dean at Rockefeller Chapel and Chuck Leber and Buck Blackley over at First Presbyterian. I learned to preach by the necessity of preaching and I am now convinced that the fact that the necessity occurred while I was still in the environment of theological education was critical.

When Granger Westberg lectured about "grief work," I listened differently, I know, because I was still reeling emotionally from sitting at Johnny Johnson's bedside, holding his hand, as he died. He was not an abstraction, not even a patient at the University Clinic upon whom Westburg's students called on in order to "write up" our intentionally Rogerian non-directive conversations for class discussion. Johnny was the first person I ever watched die. His widow and teenage sons lived a block away from our house. They were in the pew the next Sunday after he died and they were going to hear what I said. The church was the context for theological education to become preparation for ministry.

A 60s social activist, committed to civil rights and the immersion of the church in local political issues, I plunged into local politics with Kennedyesque determination and vigor, took public stands on every issue. Whether the town should drill a new well or pipe in water from Lake Michigan was by far the "hottest" local dispute. I was for lake water and in the process offended and infuriated my members who wondered what lake water had to do with the Gospel and I wrote an arrogant letter to the editor of the town paper that was unkind and hurtful to a local politician for which I have been sorry for 30 years. It was happening while I was reading, listening, arguing, in courses in social ethics.

Maybe the 25 mile daily commute was the key to my learning; that I was living in two places thoroughly and simultaneously. And I am prepared now to suggest that it may be a helpful paradigm for the future.

The basic curricular content of theological education traditionally focuses on theology, bible and history. Here and there and now and then the curriculum has included ethics, liturgics, and in this century, entered into an intentional dialogue with the social sciences and occasionally even the arts. Where theological education has had to become preparation for parish ministry, various bridges have been constructed to connect and enhance the traffic between academy and parish -- internship, for instance -- borrowing from the medical model: vigorous academic discipline followed by emersion in intense apprenticeship, field work -- which unfortunately is the way churches get someone to do things the members and hired clergy wouldn't be caught dead doing -- like taking the junior high school youth group on overnight lock-ins, and of course, a wide range of academic courses described as "Practical Theology."

As a devoted alum of this school, I love something Edward Farley observes:

> "The very structure of theological studies alienates the whole enterprise from praxis. Hence proposals on behalf of praxis made to that structure are quickly and easily absorbed and trivialized. Practical theology never has existed and does not now exist. The closest it ever came was a gleam in Schleirmacher's Eye." [2]

I am intrigued by something our own Don Browning has written:

> "The process of practical thinking, whether it be religious or secular, is indeed complex. To think and act practically in fresh and innovative ways may be the most complex thing humans ever attempt. I wish it were otherwise. Life, especially modern life, would be so much simpler." [3]

Browning proposes an intriguing alternative to the classical format of theological education -- theology, history, Bible, augmented by praxis. All theology is practical, he submits; practical theology is not a "sub-specialty" but "theology as such." Professor Browning would upset the apple cart of theological education arguing that "practical thinking is the center of human thinking and theological and technical thinking are abstractions from practical thinking." [4]

Browning is, I believe, onto something important. "We never move from theology to practice, even when it seems we do. Theory is always embedded in practice." [5]

If he is even close to the truth, there are enormous implications for how theological education and preparation for ministry actually happen. To assume that successful scholarship in theology, history and Bible is equivalent to preparation for ministry is naive. We all know that. To assume that resolution is the addition of a course in Practical Theology or a field work requirement is no less naive.

Somehow theological education and preparation for ministry must occur in a place and time and context in which individuals are living the questions, dealing with the people, managing the institution.

And so -- a conclusion:

* Knowledge of theology, history and Bible are requisite but alone do not prepare for ministry.

* Practical thinking is always, by the very nature of theological education, subject to trivialization.

* All theology is practical theology because that is the way human beings think.

Therefore the church is the primary place where preparation for ministry happens, or perhaps more consistently, the church is the locus where theological education can become preparation for ministry.

I am grateful for my experience at a university divinity school, for the academic study of religion, and for the rigorous, critical approach to theological inquiry as an expression of the human pursuit of truth.

But when theological education needs to become preparation for ministry, its locus should change, and the teaching responsibility should intentionally broaden.

I propose that preparation for ministry happen situationally, in places where praxis is daily necessity and where the Browning paradigm -- practical thinking preceding abstract thinking -- can be set free to go to work.

I propose residential experience as absolutely necessary, not in a graduate dormitory or a university neighborhood, but in a parish, a neighborhood where church people and non-church people live, move and have being.

I propose teaching parishes, large urban congregations, clusters of inner-city ministries, and rural churches, to which students in preparation for ministry, would be assigned and in which they would live and minister.

I propose intentional mentoring, apprenticing of students in preparation for ministry with experienced practitioners in a context of reflection and critique.

I propose to encourage those who think about and plan for the theological education of the future to force the issue of praxis by simply moving the location, or dividing the location between classroom and parish; to celebrate, that is, that theological common ground upon which we all stand and that most practical of all theological assertions, namely that "the Word became flesh and lived among us," not among us in classroom or cloister alone, but among us, in the world, in communities of faith, congregations, parishes, the church.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for allowing me the luxury of reflecting out loud, on my experience. And thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for this honor

FOOTNOTES

1
Updike, John, Roger's Version, a Novel, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1986, p. 114

2
Farley, Edward, Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm, Historical Perspectives, p. 30

3
Browning, Don S., A Fundamental Practical Theology, Introduction, Can Theology be Practical?, p. 11

4
Ibid

5
Ibid